

Writing Your Obituary  
Deuteronomy 34:1-12  
Nov. 2, 2008  
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Did you know that today is a significant day in the history of the church? Merry Christmas! Just kidding. Nov. 2 is known as All Souls Day, the day on which we acknowledge and remember all those who have gone before and have made it possible for us to be here today. Traditionally All Souls Day was for remembering those who weren't believers, and it followed All Saints Day on Nov. 1, which was the day reserved for remembering believers who had died. And both those days followed All Hallows Eve, or as we know it, Halloween, or as I know it, Eat Your Kids' Candy Day. This is the time of year when we reflect back on those who have gone before us.

But I used to do that *a lot* more often. While I was a news clerk at the *Louisville Courier-Journal* newspaper, one of my jobs was taking the obituaries. I would sit at a computer for eight hours doing nothing but taking information from funeral homes about dead people. Every day was All Souls Day. It was a pretty sobering job, not only because of the subject matter, but because I was reminded over and over again how a lifetime of experience could be boiled down into a paragraph.

I guess that's why today's passage from Deuteronomy looks so familiar to me. It's an obituary. It reads something like this:

Moses, age 120, died today in the land of Moab. Cause of death is unknown, but when you're 120, do you really need a reason? Moses was a former prince in Egypt, shepherd, and delivery boy (for the nation of Israel). He belonged to Brothers of the Burning Bush and Sea-Parters Club. He is survived by his wife, Zipporah; an adopted son, Joshua; and a million followers. There will be no visitation and a private funeral, with burial to follow in an undisclosed location. In lieu of flowers, the family asks you to observe a 30-day mourning period.

Yes, this last chapter of Deuteronomy is an obituary. But it is much more than that. This passage has a lot to say to us about how we should live -- and maybe even what our obituaries should look like.

Moses is poised on the edge of the Promised Land, but he knows he won't be allowed in. This must have been a bittersweet moment for Moses. When God leads him up to the top of Mount Nebo, God shows Moses something no one else could see -- a vision of the whole Promised Land spread before him, from Gilead to Dan to the Negev to Zoar, and area of about 1000 square miles. But Moses was seeing more than just geography and terrain; he was seeing the future of Israel spread out before him. He was seeing God's vision of what the people would become, inhabiting the Promised Land and building up a holy nation of people to praise and worship and serve God.

Can you imagine seeing what Moses saw? Can you imagine seeing such a magnificent vision spread out before you? Can you imagine being 120 years old and still be able to see? The only reason Moses was able to see all the Promised Land was because God gave him the vision and Moses was experienced enough to know its value.

I know of a lot of people I've run across in life who've also been on long journeys. They may not be 120 years old, but they've seen a lot. And I also know how we tend to think of and treat these people. In our society, we stampede to the new and discard the old. Newer is better,

older is just older. We even take a book full of wonderful stories and characters and guidance for living and call it the “Old” Testament.

Moses was an old man, no doubt about it. Here’s a guy who’s been dragging this mob around for 40 years in the wilderness after going ten rounds with Pharaoh. When I imagine Moses, I see a guy with blistered feet, wrinkled skin, a permanently furrowed brow, stooped over from all that walking. Moses was just downright old, 120 years worth of life in that body.

But Moses still had vision. In the physical sense as well as in the spiritual sense. Remember, Moses could see all of what God was showing him. According to scripture, Moses’ eyes were undimmed. Not bad for 120 years old. Now remember, he wasn’t wearing contacts or glasses, he didn’t have the benefit of corrective eye surgery. This was all natural God-given eyesight.

We assume that with old age comes old hopes, old dreams, old vision. We assume that as age increases, our ability to contribute, even to lead, decreases. But age brings with it a wisdom, an experience, a vision, that you simply can’t buy in stores or read about in self-help books. Age is not something you’re born with; you have to live it. I can think of several people in churches in which I’ve worshipped, people who were old in years but who taught me more about what it means to be a Christian than any sermon has. These people drew on their experience to teach me about living and loving life. They had something to say. I hope I was listening.

I’ve tried to be a better listener recently because I believe there is so much to hear and learn. A couple years ago my grandmother on my dad’s side came up to visit us. One night I sat with her on our couch and asked her all kinds of questions about her childhood, her marriage, what it was like having my dad for a son. I had never asked my grandmother these questions and I’m glad I did. She visited in October, and on Dec. 28 she died of a heart attack. She was one of those saints we remember this time of year, people who made a difference in our lives. Who made a difference in your life? Who are you remembering right now?

The flipside to that question is, “Will we be remembered that way?” In other words, what kind of legacy will we leave as we descend the mountaintop of life? I tend to worry that I won’t leave much behind me because the journey has been far from perfect. But God hasn’t called us to a perfect journey, only a faithful one.

Moses is the epitome of this axiom. You see, the dictionary defines “perfection” as “having done thoroughly.” And if anything was done thoroughly, it was the task God set before Moses. The eulogy says it all. Moses was a man God knew face-to-face. Moses gave his life to God (although with a bit of kicking and screaming), did what was asked of him (even when he doubted himself or his task), served Israel (even when they whined and complained) and led them almost into the Promised Land. That’s what I call doing a job thoroughly, even if he did it incompletely.

How do we define perfection? Is it a life in which everything is accomplished, when the Promised Land is reached? Has anyone ever actually done that? If you’re like me, your road to the Promised Land is blocked by the realities of life. Wait until I’m a little more comfortable, then I’ll cross the Jordan. Wait until I’m making X amount of dollars, wait until the kids are in school, wait until the kids are out of school, wait until everything’s paid off, wait until... We could play that game the rest of our lives, waiting until the next hurdle is cleared, only to find another hurdle, waiting to reach the top rung of the ladder, only to find there the bottom rung of the next ladder.

I think we need to shift our focus a bit here. Instead of seeing perfection as the destination, we should take a look around at our blessings, our God-given gifts, our reasons to be

thankful, and see that perfection is not a destination; perfection is in the journey. We get so focused on reaching our own Promised Lands that we fail to see the value in the journey, and in the end, fail to see that ultimately, maybe our Promised Lands are unreachable, and God has a different Promised Land in mind, the one we're living in now. Life passes us by as we wait for the ideal conditions, and when it's too late we realize those conditions were just that, an ideal, not a reality. We can "what if" our way right through our life and miss what God has for us right here, right now.

That's where Moses can speak a word to us. As he stood on that mountaintop looking ahead to the Promised Land, Moses could also look back at a life where he didn't wait for the something better to come along. He didn't say, "That burning bush is for someone else." He didn't say, "Pharaoh won't let the people go, at least I tried." He didn't say, "These people are driving me nuts!" OK, he did say that, but he didn't quit. He didn't say, "Wait until I get to the Promised Land, then I'll..." Moses had the vision to see not only the beauty of the destination, but the reward of the journey.

For those of you who are closer to 120 than to 0 today, you have a gift to give, a legacy to leave. You have stories and lessons and wisdom that are invaluable to us. Please don't think no one wants to hear it, because your story is what will live on well after your time here on earth is done. Tell your story.

For those of us still ascending the mountain, don't get so caught up in reaching the mountaintop that you don't stop to talk to those on the way down. They've been there, seen it, lived to tell about it. They know the good paths, they know the dangers to look for, the places to rest. When's the last time you made it a point to sit down with someone older than you to hear their story? Is that something you could do this week? Because I guarantee they have a story to tell. Moses did. It's quite a story. I hope we're listening.